

Virginia Sustarich
June 10, 2010

Interviewed by Evelyn McClure for the
Western Sonoma County Historical Society

EM: So you grew up here?

VS: Yes

EM: When did your family first come here?

VS: 1919

EM: Where did they come from?

VS: Minnesota and Montana

EM: Did they have any family here or did they just come to California?

VS: Well, I was, two of us were born here, I was one of seven children. Some were born in Montana, Minnesota and I was born in 1925.

EM: So they just wanted to come to California and settled in this area, what did they do? Farmers?

VS: Yes, farmers, everybody was farming then.

EM: What kind of things would they have on the farm?

VS: Everything to survive, animals, poultry.

EM: Did they grow anything to sell, like apples?

VS: Yes, they did sell excess.

EM: Where was your family farm located?

VS: Fredericks Road south of town, I'm still there on the home property.

EM: The only school around was here in Sebastopol?
Or did you go to some other school when you started school.

VS: I went to Mt. Vernon in Cunningham. Then to Analy High School. I graduated June 5th and went to work for Speas on June 7th. I was 17 and became 18 in July.

EM: What did you first do at Speas?

VS: I was secretary.

EM: What kind of operation did they have when you joined them?

VS: When I joined, if you want to go back to the original.. it was told to me by Mr. Butler who owned the Western Vinegar Co. in Petaluma and there were a lot more apples in Sebastopol so I think it was 1918 he built the vinegar plant on McKinley St.

EM: Which is the building that is now the movie theater

VS: Right, And apparently he gave Mr. Speas who was headquartered in Kansas City, Missouri and who owned plants in just about every community that had an abundance of apples. He probably gave him a lot of competition so he got to know Mr. Butler, came out to Sebastopol and gave him an offer for his plant. So it was 1918 that Mr. Butler sold his business to Mr. Speas and Mr. Speas said you have to be my manager here. So he (Butler) became manager of the plant and stayed there till he was 77 years old. He was a very active man. All of a sudden Mr. Butler became ill and the job fell to me to keep the plant going. But when prior to my term in Speas company it was a vinegar plant and then they went into the apple brandy business because there was a surplus of apples. They were rotting on the ground there were so many.

EM: And that has got to have been after Prohibition.

VS: Right. So Mr. Speas well primarily this plant is to make apple concentrate to ship to our vinegar plants. This wasn't a vinegar plant after Mr. Speas bought it.

EM: That's interesting because Mr. Butler had the vinegar works.

VS: Yeah he did but there was a glut on the market for vinegar too. So he said

we'll put our excess apple juice into apple brandy and then that went, we were very small in the distillery business. Then they decided to make apple wine which was a dessert wine which required apple brandy.

EM: To fortify it.

VS: Yes and that was a very good product. You opened a bottle of apple wine you smelled the apple aroma.

EM: Did it get shipped all over the country to be sold?

VS: It was sold primarily out of California believe it or not, people didn't know apple wine. Our biggest place to ship was Texas. Specially during the war (W.W.II) the military.

EM: I always think of vinegar using the very last thing from apples, the cores and peels. Did you use juice?
when you made brandy.

VS: Oh yes, we had a variety of apples to get a better quality, it wasn't strictly Gravensteins.

EM: Well there were a lot of other apples grown so they could be used.

VS: It had to be a blend of apples, and with our brandy also.

EM: What kind of production was there like how many cases of brandy got produced in a season?

VS: I would say we produced about 400-500 barrels, 50 gallon barrels of brandy. When there was a year when there weren't very many apples we didn't produce much brandy. And then, cases, good heavens, it had to age we usually aged ours six to ten years and if you have a barrel that's 50 gallons it might be 38 at the end. You never top up. It evaporates and the alcohol increases.
Prior to my term, in 1943 (as manager) that company also produced whiskey and they got the corn from Argentina. So that's one feature of the Speas company very few people know about.

EM: How did the corn arrive.

VS: I guess it came by ship to San Francisco and by rail to Sebastopol. You probably knew Ed Trigeiro, well I gave him all of our labels, brandy labels, wine labels and whiskey labels.

EM: He gave us one bottle and we might have labels.

VS: Do you have the labels?

EM: I don't think we have a big selection of labels.
Do you have a collection?

VS: Not anymore I gave them to Ed. He had them in a frame.

EM: Oh, wait a minute, we might have that.
he did give us some things.

VS: Mr. Butler worked for the Southern Pacific railroad and when the Lark, was dismantled, used to go from San Francisco to Los Angeles. we bought the steam whistle.

EM: The whistle from the train? We have a whistle and we thought it was from the factory, Speas.

VS: Yeah, it was from Speas we used it for years. Eight o'clock shift, then 12 then 1 and 5 whenever, we blew the whistle.

EM: That's some history we didn't know.

VS: We blew the whistle, everyone would know what time it was in town. We used the whistle when we wanted someone from the plant and Mr. Butler had whistle one, one pull, the foreman had two and it went on down.

EM: How many people were employed at Speas?

VS: Usually 50. That doesn't seem like much..

EM: Was that year round? Or seasonal?

VS: Not year round, seasonal. A lot of people we put through college because they worked in the summertime and went to school. And that worked out nice for

us because the Gravenstein apple crop was the largest crop and that lasted from July to September and that worked out fine.

EM: What kind of things did your job entail once you took over as manager?

VS: When I was secretary I did all the secretarial work and even hiring. It wasn't the secretary's job but I was interested in lab work so I did some of the alcohol content tests which is required by uncle sam. That was interesting.

EM: Were there other people doing that testing?

VS: The foreman would do it, Mr. Butler himself did it too. That helped him out because he did a lot of traveling. I was there 20 years before I became manager. That's when Mr. Butler became ill. Then I was 18 years as manager. It wasn't easy at that time to be a woman to be a manager. Especially a plant like ours which involved liquor.

EM: And you had to be supervising men who might resent having a woman as a supervisor? What kind of problems did you run into?

VS: Well we had one man who had a woman as a boss and oh boy, I was his best pal when I wasn't a boss as soon as I became boss, It was different. He would say I'm not taking orders from her.. So I called him in the office one day and said, Sam, I understand you have a problem with my being boss. I'll get Mr. Speas on the phone and if he wants you to be boss, fine, I'll step back and be your secretary. And that kind of turned the tables, he had a choice. Eventually he said I was one of the best bosses he'd had.

EM: You handled it very well.

VS: But and salesman too they'd come in and say I'd like to speak to the manager. And I'd say I am the manager and they'd say well I'd like to talk to the foreman. They would want the orders, I'd call the foreman and he would say well Virginia does all the purchasing so they'd have to come back to me or they didn't get the order. That solved that problem. The only women that worked in the plant besides me were the women in the bottling plant. And there weren't that many. Eventually when we stopped producing brandy, we didn't have that and I was the only woman.

EM: We have pictures of these great big vats where I supposed the brandy was

distilled. How did that all work? How did the machinery work. He had vinegar works and must have had to install new machinery when he went into brandy?

VS: No, because you had the same machinery, hydraulic presses which squeezed the juice out that's used in processing brandy or wine. When the juice was extracted, it went into 18,000 gallon tanks and we had a huge building which was torn down. The distillery was five stories high.

EM: Why did it have to be five stories high?

VS: The still was tall and narrow. It had chambers and it had to go to the top and drop down as alcohol.

EM: There was just one still?

VS: One still. It was 2,000 gallons it would produce.

EM: How long would it take?

VS: A little over a day.

EM: How much brandy do you get out of the 2,000 gallons of beginning juice?


VS: Probably 40 to 50 gallons.

EM: How did the whole business wind down?

VS: Mr. Butler became old, Mr. Speas became old. Mr. Butler passed away in 1965, Mr. Speas in 1971. And the executives in Kansas City operated it for awhile and things didn't go quite as well. Mr. Speas actually was a genius he had total recall. You'd say something to him and he'd remember it years later. Telephone number or anything all in his head.

EM: It's a big loss when someone like that leaves a company.

VS: Right, and the other young executives it was a little too much I guess because the plants were scattered all over. Mr. Speas made it a point to call his managers frequently. It was nothing for him to call you on the phone and then send a telegram to confirm what he said. He was a one man organization really. And in Sebastopol there were fewer and fewer apple orchards. They were pulled out for



subdivisions and whatever reasons, and now the majority are vineyards. When I was a child it was berries, everybody had a berry farm and that became a glut then apples became a glut. I don't know what is going to happen when grapes become a glut.

EM: Doesn't farming follow the same trend, when something is profitable, everybody gets into it, then there's too much.

VS: The dairy industry is going by the way and what goes in is vineyards.

EM: So then the Speas company just went out of business.?

VS: Yes, each plant was sold. There were 25 plants at one time, in New York, Washington, two, one in Yakima and Wenatchee, in Los Angeles. Fewer and fewer apples so they just sold. Pillsbury bought us out.

EM: Did they do anything with the plant after they bought it?

VS: Pillsbury has a policy you have to have a profit every month. Well how can you with a seasonal industry. So then they said well we'll put Sebastopol up for sale. We turned the last wheel in 1979 and I was caretaker to 1981. I sold the plant and some of the equipment. I was there two years after production stopped.

EM: So someone bought the property in 1981.

VS: Yes, they bought it and they were going to make it as a mini mall. And that fell through. Then, Mr. (Guy) Duryea bought it from those other people.

EM: And it sat there for quite a while didn't it. I moved here in 1992 and it was still empty and I think they were just starting to think about the theater.

VS: The theater was our bonded warehouse. Which means when we barreled the brandy it had to go into that building and we did not have a key to it. The Internal Revenue did. So if we wanted to get in that building to get any brandy out or check the barrels or anything. The IRS officer had an office in a separate building on our property.

EM: So he was there all the time.

VS: Yes most of the time. We'd ask permission to go in and if we had to take

brandy which we sold in bond which means it wasn't tax paid we had to make six copies of papers/everything. It was a nightmare. If it was tax paid we would bottle it and ship it out.

EM: So you had to pay the tax before it was sold?

VS: And a carload was \$60,000 tax. The first time I ever held a \$60,000 check my hand was shaking.

EM: Did you have to get money from the bank or did the company have that much on hand?

VS: We'd have to go to the bank and get a certified check and give it to uncle sam.

EM: So by the time Speas was over with were you ready to retire?

VS: I retired early at 55. My sister and I were going to do a little traveling. She became ill that ended that. She told me you worked hard all your life, retire.

EM: I think we have a picture with you on a woman's Baseball team. You played baseball didn't you? How long did you do that?

VS: It was as long as Sebastopol Times had a team. Several years.

EM: What years were they? How old were you when you were playing?

VS: I was 18-19, Sebastopol was quite a town for athletics. Baseball and the stands were always crowded.

EM: What teams did you play, other women's teams?
Formed locally?

VS: There was the Fouts Accounting, they had a team then we played in Vallejo, San Francisco, Cloverdale had a team. It was interesting and I could be dead tired as well as the other girls that were on that team and get on the field and you had a second wind. I got involved in badminton too after work.

EM: Competing?

VS: Yes, there was a tournament. During the war by the way, the high school opened the doors for different classes and I was surprised they allowed sports. They had English classes, Spanish classes. I got involved in the Sports, we played Santa Rosa Junior college in badminton. I really enjoyed that and I got involved with basketball if someone wanted to play we'd get a group together. And there were a lot of businessmen and even doctors that played badminton.

EM: So it was a men and women's team.?

VS: We'd compete against each other, sometimes doubles, singles. Badminton is a lot faster than tennis.

I never played tennis but I really loved badminton.

EM: What were the W.W.II years like here?

VS: For the first time in my life I saw someone's face that was black. We had people from Jamaica that came in to help pick fruit. And they came from all over, Spanish people to pick apples, other fruit and work in the canneries. Most of the Jamaicans went back home but most of the Spanish didn't. It was an education working there. Some were difficult to work with, didn't want to do this or that. After the war things changed, drastically. Every person who came in before the war was a very good worker, they came to work on time and everything and after I don't know how it happened. They'd come late and if you had someone working on a press that had to have a partner, they person had to be there otherwise someone was standing around.

EM: Were they the same people or were they service men returning?

VS: Different people. Seasonal people. Our regular crew was a very good crew. Ones that were steady. But all the canneries most of their workers were seasonal. They came from all over, people from the South, they'd walk a little slower than people in Sebastopol.